

A clinic on overcoming barriers

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Sana Mahmoud, a Shifa Community Clinic health educator, talks with a patient on Sunday. Mahmoud, who speaks Arabic, helps immigrants overcome their fears and confusion by bridging cultural and language barriers. Some come to the downtown Sacramento clinic not only because it's free but because of growing bonds with volunteers. Sacramento Bee/Anne Chadwick Williams

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Gulzar Hussein came from Woodland one recent Sunday to the Shifa health clinic in downtown Sacramento to have his high blood pressure checked.

The second-year UC Davis medical student on duty, Shabnam Hafiz, examined him, and -- with the help of a translator who spoke Hussein's native Urdu -- asked him a few questions.

Hafiz had recently returned from Hussein's homeland of Pakistan, where she'd worked in a hospital. But, she tried to tell Hussein in her rudimentary Urdu, "I can't speak the language."

Hussein laughed. The ice between the 23-year-old med student of Iranian and Pakistani descent from Los Angeles and the 39-year-old tire shop worker who immigrated six years ago was broken.

Hussein said he would return to Shifa, which means "to heal" in Arabic.

Every Sunday, the Shifa Community Clinic on V Street opens its doors to low-income Middle Eastern and South Asian patients, overcoming barriers of language and culture that impede some from receiving health care.

Many patients come to the clinic, located next door to the mosque on Fourth and V streets, not only because it is free but because they feel a connection with the volunteers who work here.

"I like coming here because it definitely helps having someone able to speak your language and make the diagnosis," Hussein said through an interpreter.

At many hospitals, finding a translator may require a significant wait. At the Shifa clinic, volunteers -- from college and medical students to community members -- speak a number of languages including Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi and Farsi. Medical care is overseen by a volunteer physician.

The Shifa facility is one of six student health clinics associated with the University of California, Davis, Medical Center, including the Paul Horn Asian Clinic, Clinica Tepati for Spanish-speaking patients and Imani Clinic, which primarily serves the African American community.

The demand for the free student clinics is expected to increase if the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors passes a measure this month banning undocumented immigrants from receiving non-emergency medical care.

"If they stop seeing undocumented immigrants at County, we'll see an influx at our clinics and not just in our particular demographics," said Bob Modjtahedi, a second-year medical student and co-director of the Shifa clinic. "We're already stretched out pretty thin in terms of the number of patients we see."

Ten to 15 patients a week visit the Shifa clinic, which treats people of any race or ethnicity. Prescription drugs -- some donated by pharmaceutical companies -- can be dispensed for free under doctors' orders.

For some medical students, the clinic provides an opportunity to learn about culture. Hafiz hopes to improve her Urdu language skills.

"Right now I feel very connected to the culture," she said.

Dr. Raminder Gill, a volunteer physician from UC Davis Medical Center, said that when a patient and doctor speak the same language, treatment is improved.

"I get a better understanding of the insights of patients and they get a better understanding of what I'm trying to communicate as well," Gill said.

Understanding cultures also improves care.

For example, getting patients to change their eating habits -- key to addressing high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes -- can be difficult.

In families that traditionally eat large communal meals, making a different dish to accommodate one member's health needs -- such as an elderly grandfather -- can seem strange, said Sana Mahmoud, a Shifa health educator.

"In our culture everyone is together and gathers all together to eat food with the whole family," said Mahmoud, who is originally from Sudan and speaks Arabic.

As part of an education outreach program, Mahmoud conducts workshops and distributes health information at local mosques and other community sites.

One disease Mahmoud focuses on is diabetes. In addition to helping patients manage their glucose levels, much of her work centers on preventative diets and exercise.

Some groups prepare a lot of fried food, so Mahmoud tries to persuade them to use other cooking methods, or at least to use healthier oils.

One significant cultural difference that the Shifa clinic accommodates is gender. Some Muslim patients refuse to be examined by male doctors -- or can be examined only under certain conditions.

"We're very cognizant of the fact that, especially for someone wearing a veil, we be culturally sensitive," Gill said. "We examine them through their clothes and we always defer to and respect their wishes."

Dr. Shagufta Yasmeen, a female obstetrician at the medical center and one of the founders of the clinic, often oversees a monthly women's clinic for women whose beliefs prohibit them from being examined by a man.

Modjtahedi, a 21-year-old Iranian American who attended local mosques while growing up in Davis, is familiar with the communities the clinic serves.

"I think it's important to be part of a medical school with deep connections to the community," Modjtahedi said.

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Sonia Sonik, a second-year UCD medical student, center, listens to Ghousia Khan's breathing during Khan's visit to the Shifa clinic with her daughter Fauzia Ali. Khan has been going to the Shifa clinic -- its name means "to heal" in Arabic -- for about four years. Sacramento Bee/Anne Chadwick Williams



Onkar Judge, left, Bob Modjtahedi and Shabnam Hafiz -- second-year UC Davis medical students -- wait to confer with the clinic's doctor about their patients, many of whom are from the Mideast. Sacramento Bee/Anne Chadwick Williams